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CIA would endanger free press

TO LARGE segments of the world, where the press is used as a deliberate instrument of government policy, the free and unfettered American press stands out in splendid contrast.

It is no secret that powerful forces in Washington have waged a relentless and continuing battle to make this independent force a propaganda instrument of government.

Among the disturbing revelations that flowed out of the Watergate era was the disclosure that the Central Intelligence Agency was using media representatives in its intelligence network. Widespread protests from the American press forced the CIA to abandon the practice.

CIA director Stansfield Turner has just revealed that the battle for an unfettered press is far from over. Turner said at a session of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington that his agency would consider using journalists for intelligence purposes when the desired results cannot be obtained in any other way.

TURNER'S confession drew heated and deserved opposition from editors in his audience. Eugene Patterson, editor of the St. Petersburg Times, Abe

Rosenthal, New York Times executive editor; and others complained rightly that even the remote possibility of CIA connections make it difficult for American foreign correspondents to operate overseas.

Every media representative would be suspected of being a CIA informer. In the wake of congressional investigations of the CIA in the mid-1970s, then-CIA director George Bush adopted a regulation prohibiting the agency from using full-time correspondents for U.S. newspapers and broadcast media in secret operations. Disturbingly, Turner reported that he has modified that regulation.

In Marxist governments, where the press hides much more than it discloses, the media is a powerful instrument of government.

Despite all of our shortcomings, one of the crowning glories of the free press is its ram-bunctious independence. The CIA must not be allowed to subvert that freedom.

If one governmental agency, under the guise of national security, can sully that independence, it will only be a matter of time until our press will be no different from those in totalitarian nations.